

Black history is American history

By: Lt. Col. Keith Bohley
179th Chaplains Office

February is black history month. A time we can look intentionally at what it means to be an American. January 20th we observe Martin Luther King's birthday. The celebration of a great American who helped to teach nonviolence in over-coming adversity, even though living in the midst of violent times. February 17th is Presidents Day. Celebrating Lincoln's birthday February 12th and Washington's birthday February 22nd. Both men played a key role in the development of our nation at crucial times in its development. (As a side note I see our MEO calendar has changed February 17th to Washington's birthday observed.) But you may ask why a special month for black history?

A print hanging in recruiting states diversity is one thing we all have in common. America is the greatest nation in the world because it struggles with and encourages differences as a way of defining what it means to be American.

The uniqueness of all American's background is the fabric that forms the tapestry of the red, white and blue. As a part of the history we know such names as Harriet Tubman, George Washington Carver, Booker T Washington, Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King, Louis Armstrong, Jackie Robinson and others. But there is so much we do not know which adds defining hues to our fabric.

Tech Sgt. Philip E. Copland writing for American Forces Information Service states;

"These are all great people in history, but there are so many more not mentioned. There is so much African-American history I did not learn as a child. Sure, I learned about Alexander Graham Bell, but not Lewis Latimer, who lived from 1848 to 1928. Born in Boston to an escaped slave, Latimer served in the Union Navy during the Civil War and later became an inventor. Hired as an office boy for a Boston patent law firm,

he became its chief patent draftsman and executed the patent drawings for many of Bell's telephones.

The textbooks taught about Benjamin Franklin, but I do not recall mention of Benjamin Banneker, an African-American mathematician, astronomer and inventor. Appointed to the District of Columbia Commission by President George Washington in 1790, he worked with Pierre L'Enfant, Andrew Ellicott and others to plan the new capital of Washington, D.C. After L'Enfant was dismissed from the project and took his detailed maps away with him, Banneker reproduced the plans by drawing from his remarkable memory. I'm sure most Americans are totally unaware that Thomas L. Jennings, 1791-1859, was the first African American known to have patented an invention — a dry-cleaning process in 1821. Jan Ernst Matzeliger, 1852-1889, born in Suriname, came to the United States in about 1872, settled in Lynn, Mass., and patented a shoe-shaping machine in 1883 that revolutionized the shoemaking industry. I did not learn about Dr. Charles Drew, who developed a process for preserving blood as plasma and started the first blood bank. He taught at the Howard University Medical School in Washington and made major contributions to surgical medicine."

African Americans also have a rich history in America's military. Serving often under difficult circumstances. African Americans served the country in all of her conflicts.

Copland has it right. There is much we do not know but should be willing to find out. History is a great teacher. It is good to learn black American history because there history is my history for I too am an American.

Something to think about.

History of month is no coincidence

By: Tech. Sgt. Elaine Zemanek
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Black History Month is celebrated each February to affirm, recognize and appreciate the rich heritage, achievements, progress and diversity of African-American peoples. An African-American scholar, Carter G. Woodson, created and promoted Negro History Week in 1926. He chose the week in February to correspond to the respective birthdays of Frederick Douglass, an ex-slave and slavery abolitionist and Abraham Lincoln, the signer of the document granting slaves in the United States freedom, the Emancipation Proclamation. In 1976, the week-long celebration expanded to one month. Our annual observance provides an opportunity to highlight features of the overall African-American experience.

There is no one black family. More typically, there are a range of black family types with a host of variances specific to the group. Some examples of black family types would be black middle class families, which have existed since before the Civil War. Haitian-American families are immigrants who came to the U.S. from the small Caribbean island known as Haiti. West Indian American families are the English-speaking Caribbean population. They began immigrating to the U.S. as early as 1820 and have different types of West Indian households.

African-Americans have participated in every major U.S. war. It was not however; until after World War II the U.S. Armed Forces became integrated, under a 1948 executive order by President Harry S. Truman. William Carney was the first African American to receive the Medal of Honor for his valor during battle on July 18, 1863 as a member of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment.

History tells the tales of many famous minority groups called by this country to battle, their legacy lives on and there continues to be great African-American leaders in military service today.